

Strangers When We Meet

by Hanif Kureishi

Can you hear me? No. No one can hear me.

Nobody knows I am here.

But I can hear them.

I am in a hotel room, sitting forward in a chair, leaning my ear against the wall. In the next room is a couple. They have been, talking, amicably enough. Their exchanges seem slight but natural. However, their voices are low. Attentive though I am, I cannot make out the details.

I recall that when listening through obstructions, a glass can be effective. I tip-toe to the bathroom to fetch one. Holding it against the wall with my head attached, I attempt to enhance my hearing. Which way round should the glass go? If people could see me crouched like this! But in here I am alone and everything is spoiled.

This was to be my summer holiday, in a village by the sea. My bag is open on the bed, a book of Love Poetry and a biography of Rod Stewart on top. Yesterday I went to Kensington High Street and shopped for guide-books, walking boots, novels, sex toys, drugs, and Al Green tapes for my walkman. I packed last night and got to bed early. This morning I set my alarm for six and read a little of Stanislavski's 'My Life In Art'. "I have lived a variegated life, during the course of which I have been forced more than once to change my most fundamental ideas..."

Later, I ran in Hyde Park and as usual had breakfast in a cafe, with my flat-mates, an actress and an actor with whom I was at drama school. "'Good luck! Have a great time, you lucky bastard!'" they called, as I headed for the station with my bag over my shoulder. They are enthusiastic about everything, as young actors tend to be. Perhaps that is why I prefer older people, like Florence, who is 'in the next room. Even as a teenager I preferred my friends' parents - usually their mothers to my own friends. It was what people had to say about their lives that excited me, rather than football or parties.

Just now I returned from the beach, ten minutes walk away, past a row of new bungalows. The sea was lugubrious, almost grey. I trudged beside deserted bathing huts set in scrub land. There was some appropriate beauty in the overcast desolation and drizzle, and the open, empty distances. A handful of stationary men in yellow capes nursed fishing lines on the shore. On a patch of tarmac people were crowded in camper vans. All the essential elements for a holiday in England seemed to be in place. A couple who needed to talk could have the opportunity here.

Bounded by farms and fields of grazing, cattle and horses, this hotel is a large cottage with barns to the side, set in flower-filled gardens. There is a dining room, bright as a chandelier with glass and cutlery, where a tie is required - these little snobberies increase the further you are from London. But you can eat the same food in the bar, which is situated [as they said in the hotel guide, which Florence and I studied together] in the basement of the hotel. The rooms are snug, if not a little floral, and with an unnecessary abundance of equine motifs. Nevertheless, there is a double-bed, a television, and a bathroom you need not fear.

Now there is laughter next door! It is, admittedly, only him, the unconcerned laughter of someone living in a solid, established world. Yet she must have gone to the trouble to say something humorous. Why is she not amusing me? What did Florence say? How long will I be able to bear this?

Suddenly I get up, blunder over the corner of the bed and send the glass flying. Perhaps my cry and the bang will smash their idyll, but why should it? I doubt whether my lover knows that I have been allocated the next room. Although we arrived in the same taxi, we did not check-in together, since I went to explore, just as my sisters and I would have done, on holiday with our parents. It is only later, when I open the door, that I hear her voice and realise we are in adjacent rooms.

I will leave here; I have to. It will not be tonight. The thought of going home is more than disappointing. What will my flat-mates say? We are not best friends: their bemusement I can survive, and I could live in the flat as if I am away, with the curtains drawn, taking no calls, eschewing the pubs and cafes where I do the crossword and write letters seeking work. But if I ring my close friends they will say, why are you back already? What went wrong? What will I reply? There will be laughter and gossip. The story will be repeated by people who have never met me. It could trail me, for years.

Tomorrow I could go on to Devon or Somerset, as Florence and I discussed. We intended to leave it open. Our first time away - in fact our first complete night together - was to be an adventure. We wanted to enjoy one another free of the thought that she would have to return to her husband in a few hours. We would wake up, make love, and exchange dreams over breakfast.

I am not in the mood to decide anything.

They have plenty to say next door: a little unusual, surely, for a couple who have been married five years.

I wipe my eyes, wash my face and go to the door. I will have a few drinks at the bar and order supper. I have inspected the menu and the food looks promising, particularly the puddings, which Florence loves to take a spoon of, push away and say to the waiter, "that's me done!" Perhaps, from across the room, I will have the privilege of watching this.

But I return to my position against this familiar piece of wall, massage my shin and try to depict what they are doing, as if I am listening to a radio play. Probably they are getting changed. Often, when I am alone with Florence, I turn around and she is naked. She removes her clothes as easily as others slip off their shoes. At twenty nine her body is supple. I think of her lying naked on my bed reading a script for me, and saying what she thinks, as I fix something to eat. She does the parts in funny voices until I am afraid to take the project seriously. I have a sweater of hers, and some gloves, which she left at my place. Why don't I rap on their door? I am all for surrealism.

They will be in the dining room later. I cannot see why it would occur to him to take her elsewhere tonight. The man will eat opposite his woman, asking her opinion of the sauces, contentedly oblivious of everything else, knowing Florence's lips, jokes, breasts and kindnesses are his. I fear my own madness. Not that I will vault across the table and choke either of them. I will sit with my anger and will not appreciate my food. I will go to bed forlorn, and half-drunk, only to hear them again. The hotel is not full: I can ask for another room. In the bar I saw a woman reading *The Bone People*. There are several young Austrian tourists too, in long socks, studying maps and guide books. What

a time we could all have.

But there is an awful compulsion. I need to know how they are, together. Somehow, my ear will always be pressed against this wall.

Earlier today I was sitting in the train at the station. I had bought wine, sandwiches and, as a surprise, chocolate cake. The sun burned through the window. [It is odd how one imagines that just because the sun is shining in London, it is shining everywhere else.] I had purchased first class seats, paying for the trip with money earned on a film, playing the lead, a street boy, a drug kid, a thief. I have been shown the rough cut. It is being edited and will have a rock sound track. The producer is confident of getting it into the Director's Fortnight, in Cannes, where, he claims, they are so moneyed and privileged, they adore anything seedy and cruel.

Florence is certainly sharper than my agent. When I first heard about the film from some other actors she told me that when she was an actress she'd had supper with the producer a few times. I imagined she was boasting, but she rang him at home, and insisted the director meet me. I sat on her knee with my fingers on her nipple as she, made the call. She didn't admit that we know one another, but said she has seen me in a play. "He's not only pretty," she said, pinching my cheek. "He has a heart-breaking sadness, and charm."

There were scores of young actors being considered for the part. I recognised most of them smoking, snuffling and complaining in the line outside the audition room. I presumed we would be rivals for life but it was to me that the producer said, "It is yours if you want it!"

Waiting for Florence O'Hara on the train made my blood so effervescent that I speculated about whether I could have her in the toilet. I had never attempted such a caper, but she refused me little. Or perhaps she could slip her hand under my newspaper. For days I had been imagining what pleasures we might make. We would have a week of one another before I went to Los Angeles for the first time, to play a small part in an independent American movie.

With two minutes before the train was to leave - and I was becoming concerned, having already been walking about the station for an hour - I glimpsed her framed in the window and almost shouted out. To confirm the fact that we were going on holiday, she was wearing a floppy purple hat. Florence can dress incongruently at times, wearing, say, antique jewelry and a silk top with worn-out, frayed shoes, as if by the time she arrives at her feet she has forgotten what she has done with her head.

Behind her was her husband.

I recognised him from a wedding photograph I saw on the one occasion I popped warily into their flat, to survey their view of Hammersmith Bridge and the river. Florence had suggested I paint the view. Today, for some reason, he was seeing her off. She would wave through the window at him - I hoped she would not kiss him - before sinking down next to me.

There is always something suspicious about the need to be alone. The trip had taken some arranging. At first, conspiring in bed, Florence and I thought she should tell her husband she was holidaying with a girlfriend. But intricate lies made Florence's hands perspire. Instead, she ascertained when her husband would be particularly busy at the

office, and insisted that she needed to read, walk and think. "Think about what?" he asked, inevitably, as he dressed for work. But, quietly, she could be inflexible, and he liked to be magnanimous.

"All right my dear," he announced. "Go and be alone and see how much you miss me."

During the week before our departure, Florence and I saw one another twice. She phoned and I caught a taxi outside my front door in Gloucester Road. She put on a head scarf and dark glasses, and slipped out to meet me in one of the many pubs near her flat, along the river. There was an abstraction about her that made me want her more, and which I assumed would be repaired by our holiday together.

Her husband was walking through the train towards me. Despite having left the office for only an hour, he was wearing a cream linen jacket, jeans and old deck shoes, without socks. Fine, I thought, he's so polite he's helping her right into her seat, that's something a twenty seven year old like me could learn from.

He heaved her bag onto the rack and they sat opposite, across the aisle. He glanced indifferently in my direction. She was captivated by the activity on the platform. When he talked she smiled. Then I noticed she was tugging at the skin around her thumbnail until it bled, and she had to find a tissue in her bag. Florence was wearing her wedding ring, something she had never done with me, apart from the first time I met her.

With an unmistakable jolt, the train left the station, on its way to our holiday destination with me, my lover and her husband aboard.

I stood up, sat down, tapped myself on the head, searched in my bag, and looked around wildly, as if seeking someone to explain the situation to me. Eventually, having watched me eat the chocolate cake - on another occasion she would have licked the crumbs from my lips - Florence left her seat to fetch sandwiches. I went to the toilet where she was waiting for me.

"He insisted on coming," she whispered, digging her nails into my arm.

"It was yesterday. He gave me no choice. I couldn't resist without making him jealous and suspicious. I had no chance to speak to you."

"He's staying the whole week'?"

She looked agitated. "He'll get bored. This kind of thing doesn't interest him."

"What sort of thing.?"

"Being on holiday. We usually go somewhere... like Italy. Or the Hamptons-"

"Where?"

"Outside New York."

She said, "I'll encourage him to go home. Will you wait'?"

"I can't say," I told her. "You've really made a mess of everything! How could you do such a thing!"

"Rob-"

She tried to kiss me but I pulled away. She passed her hand between my legs - and I wish she hadn't - before returning to her husband. I walked up and down the train before sitting down. It didn't occur to me to find a place somewhere else. I noticed that blood from her thumb was smeared over my arm and hand.

I had never seen her look this miserable. She is sometimes so nervous she will spill the contents of her bag over the street and have to get on her knees to retrieve her things. Yet she can be brave. On the tube once, three young men started to bait and rob

the passengers. While the rest of us were lost in terror, she attacked the robbers with an insane fury that won her a bravery award.

For the rest of the journey she pretended to be asleep. Her husband read a thriller.

At the country station, as I marched off the platform, I saw the hotel had sent a car to pick us up: one car. Before I could inquire about trains back to London, the driver approached me.

"Robert Miles?"

"Yes?"

"This way please."

The bent countryman led me outside where the air was cool and fresh. The immensity of the sky could have calmed a person. It was for this that Florence and I decided, one afternoon, to get away.

The countryman opened the car door.

"Sit down, sir." I hesitated. He swept dog hairs from the seat and said, "I'll drive as slowly as I can, and tell you a little about the area."

He deposited my bag in the boot. I had no choice but to get in the car. He shut the door. Florence and her husband were invited to sit in the back. As we drove away the car bulged with our heat and presence. The driver talked to me, and listened to them.

"I'm glad I decided to come," Florence's husband was saying. "Still, we could have gone up to the House."

"Oh. that place." she sighed.

"Yes, it's like having a third parent, You don't have to keep telling me you don't like it. What made you decide on here?"

I wanted to turn round and say, "I decided-"

"I saw it in a brochure," she said .

"You told me you'd been here as a child."

"Yes, the brochure reminded me. I went to lots of places as a child, with my mother."

In the mirror I saw him put his arm around her and lay his hand on her breast. "Your mad mother," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"Just us now," he said. "I'm so glad I came."

I am hungry. At last I unstick my ear from the wall, shake my head as if to clear it, go downstairs, and have supper in the bar crowded with the local luses, who prefer this hotel to the pubs. I eat with my back to the room, a book in front of me, wondering where Florence and her husband are sitting and what they are saying, like someone in Plato's cave, trying to read the shadows. Half-way through the meal, having resolved to face them at last, I rise suddenly, change my seat and turn around. They are not there.

As I order another drink the plump girl behind the bar smiles at me. "We thought you were waiting for some lucky person who didn't turn up."

"There's no lucky person but it's not so bad."

I take my drink and walk about, though I do not know where I am going. Waitresses tear in and out of the hot dining room, so smart, inhibited and nervous, lacking the London arrogance, aggression and beauty. Middle-aged women with painted

faces and bright dresses, and satisfied men in suits and ties, who do not question their right to be here - this being their world - are beginning to leave, holding glasses. For a moment they stand on this piece of earth, as it moves on imperceptibly, and they gurgle and chuckle with happiness.

Optimistically I follow a couple into one of the sitting rooms where they will have more drinks and coffee. I collapse into a high-backed sofa.

After a time I recognise the voice I am listening to. Florence and her husband have come in and are sitting behind me. They start to play Scrabble. I am close enough to smell her.

"I liked the fish," she is saying. "The vegetables were just right. Not overcooked and not raw."

I have been thinking of how proud I was that I had hooked a married woman.

"Florence." he says. "It's your turn. Are you sure you're concentrating?"

When I first started with Florence I wanted to be discreet as well as wanting to show-off. I hoped to run into people I know; I was convinced my friends were spreading gossip about me. I had never had an adventure like it. If it failed, I would walk away unscathed.

"We don't eat enough fish," she says.

Certainly I didn't think much about what her husband might be like, or why she married him. To me she made him irrelevant. It was only us. More importantly, I have hardly thought about the distinction between my fantasy of her, and who she really might be.

He says, "You don't like to kiss me when I've eaten meat."

"No, I don't," she says.

"Kiss me now," he says.

"Let's save it."

"Let's not."

"Archie-"

Her voice sounds forced and dull, as if she is about to weep. How long do I intend to sit here? My mind whirls: I have forgotten who I am. I imagine catastrophes and punishments everywhere. I suppose it was to cure myself of such painful furies that I become depressed so often. When I am depressed I shut everything down, living in a tiny part of myself, in my sexuality or ambition to be an actor. Otherwise, I kill myself off. I have talked to Florence about these things - about 'melancholy', as she puts it - and she understands it: the first person I have known who does.

I realise that if I peep around the arm of the sofa I can see Florence from the side, perched on a stool. I move a little, now she is in full view, wearing a tight white top, cream bags and white sandals.

Oddly, I am behaving as if this man has stolen my woman. In fact it is I who have purloined his, and if he finds out, he could easily become annoyed and perhaps violent. But I gaze and gaze at her, at the way she puts her right hand across her face and rests the back of her hand on her cheek with her fingers beneath her eye, a gesture she must have made as a child, and will probably make as an old woman.

If he is a ruling presence in our lives, he is an invisible one; and if she behaves a little, lets say, obscurely, at times, it is because she lives behind a wall I can only listen at. She is free during the day but likes to account for where she is. He would have been more

than satisfied with, "I spent the afternoon at the Tate" and could endure with less about its Giacomettis. When we separate at the end of each meeting she often becomes agitated and upset.

I assumed that I did not care enough about her to worry about her husband. It never occurred to me that she and I would live together, for instance: we would continue casually until we fell out. Nevertheless, watching her now, I am not ready for that. I want her to want me, and me alone. I must play the lead and not be a mere walk-on.

The barmaid comes and picks up my glass. "Can I get you something else?"

"No thanks," I say in a low voice.

I notice that Florence raises her head a little.

"Did you enjoy your meal?" says the barmaid.

"Yes. Particularly the fish. The vegetables were just right. Not overcooked and not raw." Then I say, "When does the bar close?"

"Thursday!" she says, and laughs.

Without looking at Florence or her husband, I follow her out of the room and lean tiredly across the bar.

"What are you doing down here?" she says this as if she's certain that it is not my kind of place.

"Only relaxing," I say.

She lowers her voice. "We all hate it down here. Relaxing's all there is to do. You'll get plenty of it."

"What do you like to do?"

"We used to play Russian roulette with cars. Driving across cross-roads, hoping that nothing is coming the other way. That sort of thing."

"What's your name?"

"Martha."

She puts my drink down. I tell her my room number.

"That's all right," she says. Martha leans towards me.

"Listen-" she says.

At that moment Florence's husband sits heavily on the stool beside me and shifts about on it, as he is trying to screw it into the floor. I scuttle along a little.

He turns to me. "All right if I sit down?"

"Why not?" I say.

He orders a cigar. "And a brandy," he says to Martha. He looks at me before I can turn my back. "Anything for you?"

I start to get up. "I'm just off."

"Something I said?"

"No."

He says, "I saw you in the train."

"Really? Oh yes. Was that your wife?"

"Of course."

"Is she going to join us?"

"How do I know? Do you want me to ring the room?"

"I don't want you to do anything."

"Have a brandy." He lays his hand on my shoulder. "I say, barmaid - a brandy for this young man!"

"Right," I say. "Right."
"Do you like brandy?" she says to me, kindly.
"Very much," I say.
He drags his tie off and stuffs it in his jacket pocket.
"Sit down," he says. "We're on bloody holiday. Let's make the most of it! Can I ask your name?"

I met Florence nearly a year ago in a screening room, where we were the only people viewing a film made by a mutual friend. She lay almost on her back in the wide seat, groaning, laughing and snorting throughout the film. At the end - before the end, in fact - she started talking about the performances. I invited her out for a drink. After leaving university, she was an actress for a couple of years. "It was a cattle-market, darling," she said. "Couldn't stand being compared to other people."

Yet a few days after we met, she was sitting cross-legged on the floor in my place, as my flat-mates wrote down the names of casting directors she suggested they contact. She fitted easily into my world of agents, auditions, scripts, and the confusion of young people whose life hangs on chance, looks, and the ability to bear large amounts of uncertainty. It was not only that she liked the semi-student life, the dope-smoking, the confused promiscuity and exhibitionism, but that she seemed to envy and miss it.

"If only I could stay," she'd say theatrically, at the door. "Stay then," I replied from the top of the stairs.

"Not yet," she said.

"When?"

"You enjoy yourself! Live all you can!"

Our 'affair' began without being announced to anyone - not even to us. She rang me - I rarely phoned her; she asked to see me - "at ten past five, in the Scarsdale!" and I would be there with ten minutes to spare. Certainly, I had nothing else to do but attend actors' workshops, and read. Sometimes we went to bed. Sexually she will say and do anything, with the enthusiasm of someone dancing or running. I am not always certain she is entirely there; sometimes I have to remind her she is not giving a solo performance.

Often we go to the theatre in the afternoon, and then to a pub to discuss the writing, acting, and direction. She takes me to see peculiar theatre, groups that use grotesquerie, masks and gibberish. She has introduced me to dance and performance art. When she kisses me goodbye and goes home, or out to meet her husband, I see actresses, girls who work in TV, students, au pairs. They keep me from feeling too much for Florence. There was one night of alcohol and grief, when I wept and hated her inaccessibility. However, I have not had a suitable girlfriend for more than two years. The last woman I lived with became only my friend; the relationship lacked velocity and a future. My life did tend toward stasis, which Florence has recognised.

I had been finding it difficult to break with my background, in South London. The men I grew up with were tough and loud-mouthed, bragging of their ignorance and crudity. They believed aggression was their most necessary tool. On leaving school they became villains and thieves. In their twenties, when they had children, they turned to car dealing, building or Security. They continued to go to football matches, drink heavily, and pursue teenage longings, ideals to which they seem to have become addicted. What I

want to do - act - represents an inexplicable ambition that intimidates them, and, by its nature, will leave them behind. I am not saying there are not any working class actors. I hope to play many parts. I want to transform myself until I become unrecognisable. But I will not become an actor for whom being working class is 'an act'. No cops or criminals in TV series for me.

In the pub with these friends I try to retain the accent and attitudes of my past, but I have emerged from the anonymous world and they are contemptuous and provocative. "Give us a speech, Larry. To buy a drink or not to buy a drink!" I am about to get into a fight over divergent ideas of who I should be. I begin to consider them cowardly, living only little lives, full of bold talk, but doing nothing and going nowhere. It is not until later that Florence teaches me that part of being successful is the ability to bear resentment and envy.

Not that I am particularly educated. If she notices it, Florence never comments on my ignorance. She can be lighthearted and frivolous herself; once she shopped for two days. Nevertheless, she sits me down in front of the most exacting films. Bergman's 'Cries and Whispers', for instance, she thinks it necessary we both absorb through repetition; it is as if she is singing along with the film, or, in the case of that work, moaning. She does not categorize these things as art, as I do, but uses them as objects of immediate application.

Almost as soon as I met Florence, she altered the direction of my life. The Royal Shakespeare Company had offered me a two year contract. I would share a cottage in Stratford. She would sit with me beside the Avon. I had celebrated in Joe Allens with friends, and my agent was working on the contract.

To celebrate I took Florence out to lunch. I read in a magazine that the restaurant was one of the smartest in London, but she swung about in her chair. As thin and flat-chested as a dancer, I should have remembered that she dislikes eating. Certainly she does not like sitting down for her food surrounded by people she has seen on television and considers pompous. Looking at her in such starched surroundings I can see how eccentric or individual she is.

"I have to tell you that you must turn the Stratford opportunity down," she said.

"It's every young actor's dream, Florence," I said patronizingly.

"Don't be such a common little fool. They're too small, too small," she says. "Not only that suit you're wearing, but the parts. Going to the Royal Shakespeare Company will be a waste of time." She flicks my nose with her fingernail.

"Ow."

"You must listen to me."

I did.

My agent was amazed and furious. Without entirely knowing why, I took Florence's advice. Soon I was playing big roles in little places: Biff in *Death Of A Salesman*, in Bristol; the lead in a new play in Cheltenham; Romeo in Yorkshire.

With a girlfriend she came on the train to see previews and we traveled back together late at night, drinking wine in plastic cups. She anatomised my performance severely but I took notes. Criticism, I suppose, reminded me of my dependency on her. Yet, when she was finished, and I was almost finished off, she continued to look at me without any diminishment of affection.

It was fine by her if I took small parts on television or in films. I had to get used

to the camera so that I could concentrate on movies, "like Gary Oldman and Daniel Day-Lewis" as she put it. She said she understands what women would like about me on screen, when I can only laugh at such an idea. Also she says that most actors see only moments; I have to learn how to develop a part through the whole film. She told me to learn as much as I could, for when it took off for me, it would happen very quickly. She even suggested that I should direct movies, saying, "If you generate your own work it will give you another kind of pleasure."

Like my friends at drama school, my head was full of schemes and fantasies. I have always been impressed by people who live with deliberation. Yet ambition, or desire in the world, makes me apprehensive. I am afraid of what I want, of where it might take me, and what it might make others think of me. Yet, as Florence explains, how are cathedrals and banks built, diseases eliminated, dictators crushed, football matches won without frustration and the longing to overcome it, called ambition? Often the simplest things have to be explained. Florence fills me with hope, but ensures it is based on the Possible.

I have little idea of what Florence dreams of, and of what kind of world she inhabits with Archie, who is in 'property'. I doubt she is ensnared in some kind of Dolls House. In the middle of the city in which I live, is an undisturbed English continuity: they are London 'bohemians'. It is an expensive indolence and carelessness, but the money for country houses, and for villas in France and the West Indies, as well as for parties, the opera, excursions and weekends away, never seems to run out. This set has known one another for generations; their parents were friends and lovers in those alcoholic times, the 50s and 60s. Perhaps Florence is lost in something she does not entirely like or understand but when she calls her husband's world 'grown-up' I resent the idea that she considers my world childish. My guess is that she is uncomfortable in such an intransigent and bloodless world but is unable to live according to her own rules.

"Rob," I stay.

Florence's husband offers me his be-ringed hand. I can hardly bear to touch him, and he must find me damp with apprehension.

"Archie O'Hara. Stayed here before?"

"No... I just came down...to get away."

"From what?"

"You know."

"Yes," he says, indifferently. "Don't I know. That's what we're doing. Getting away."

We sit there and Martha looks at us as if we all know one another. Archie wears a blue jacket, white shirt and yellow corduroys: his face is smooth and well-fed. As Florence has chosen to be with him - most of the time - he must, I imagine, have some unusual qualities. Is he completely dissimilar to me, or does he resemble me in ways I cannot see? If I set aside my own wretchedness, perhaps I will learn.

"How long are you staying?" I ask.

He puffs on his cigar and says nothing.

Martha says, "I could tell you where to go and what to look at, if you want - "

Archie says, "Thanks, but I've been thinking of getting another country place. I inherited a stately home as they call them these days, with a lot of Japanese photographing me through the windows. Sometimes I feel like sitting there in a dress and tiara. My wife says you can't sit down without falling into the dust of a dozen centuries. So we might have to drive round ... estate agents and all that."

I say, "Does your wife like the country?"

"London women have fantasies about fields. But she suffers from hay fever. I can't see the point in going to a place where you know no one. But then I can't see the point in anything."

He puts his head back and laughs.

"Are you depressed?"

"You know that, do you?" He sighs. "It's staring everyone in the face, like a slashed throat." He says after a time, "I'm not going to kill myself. But I could, just as well."

"I had it for two years, once."

He squeezes my arm as Florence sometimes does, "Now it's gone?"

I tap the wooden bar. "Yes."

"That's good to hear. You're a happy little man, are you now? "

I am about to inform him that it is returning, probably as a result of meeting him. But perhaps that is despair not depression. These distinctions are momentous to melancholics.

We discuss the emptying out-, the fear of living: the creation of a wasteland; the denigration of value and meaning. I tell him melancholy was part of my interior scene and that I considered it to be the way the world was, until I stood against it.

I announce, "People make themselves sick when they aren't leading the lives they should be leading."

He bangs the bar. "How mundane, but true."

By now the place has almost emptied. Martha collects the glasses, sweeps the floor and wipes down the bar. She continues to put out brandies for us.

She watches us and says, "There isn't much intelligent conversation down here."

"What do you think of meditation?" he says. "Eastern hogwash or truth?"

"It helps my concentration," I say. "I'm an actor."

"There's a lot of actors about. They rather get under one's feet, talking about 'centering' and all that."

I say. "Do you know any actors? Or actresses?"

"Do you count ten breaths or only four?" he says, "when meditating"

"Four," I say. "There's less time to get lost."

"Who taught you?"

Your wife, I am about to say.

"I had a good meditation teacher," I say.

"Where was the class ... could you tell me?"

"The woman who taught me... I met her by chance, one day, in a cinema. She seemed to like me instantly. I liked her liking me. She led me on, you could say."

"Really?" says Martha, leaning across the bar.

"-Only to take my hand and tell me, with some sadness, that she was married. I thought that would suit me. Anyhow, she taught me some things. "

"She didn't tell you she was married?" Martha said.

"She did, yes. Just before we slept together."

"Moments before?" said Martha. "She sounds like an awful person."

"Why?"

"To do that to you! Do you want her to leave her husband?"

"What for? I don't know. I haven't thought about it." Archie laughs. "Wait 'til he catches up with youth"

"I hope I'm not keeping you," I say to Archie.

"My wife will be on her REMs by now. I've missed my conjugals for today."

"Does she usually go to sleep at this time?"

"I can't keep that woman out of bed."

"And she reads in bed? Novels?"

"What are you, a fucking librarian?"

I say, "I like basic information about people. The facts, not opinions."

"Yes. That's a basic interest in people. And you still have that?"

"Don't you?"

He thinks about it. "Perhaps you study people because you're an actor."

Martha lights a cigarette. She has become thoughtful. "It's not only that. I know it isn't. It is an excuse for looking. But looking is the thing." She turns to me with a smile.

"That might be right, my dear," Archie says. "Things are rarely only one thing."

For my benefit she shoots him a fierce look and I smile at her.

"Better make a move," he says. "Better had."

I want to ask him more. "What does your wife do? Did you ever see her act?"

"Told you she was an actress, did I? Don't remember that. Don't usually say that, as it's not true. Like women, eh?"

"Sorry?"

"Saw how you appreciated my wife, on the train." He gets down from the stool, and staggers. "It's beautiful when I'm sitting down. Better help us upstairs."

He finds my shoulder and connects himself to it. He is heavy and I feel like letting him go. I do not like being so close to him.

"I'll give you a hand," Martha says. "It's not far. You're in the next room to one another."

One on each side, we heave him upstairs. The last few steps he takes with gingerly independence.

At the door he turns. "Guide me into the room. Don't know the layout. Could be pitch dark with only my wife's teeth for light."

Martha takes his key and opens the door, for him. "Goodnight," I say.

I am not accompanying him into the bedroom.

"Hey." he falls into the room.

I wave at Martha.

"Archie," says startled Florence from the darkness within. "Is that you?"

"Who else, dammit? Undress me"

"Archie-

"Wife's duty!"

I sink down beside the wall like a gargoyle and think of her tearing at the warm mound of him. Now I have seen him, his voice seems clearer.

I hear him say, "I was just talking to someone."

"Who?"

"That boy in the next room."

"Which boy?"

"The actor, you fool. He was in the train. Now he's in the hotel!"

"Is he? Why?"

"How do I know?"

He switches the TV on. I would not have done such a thing when she was sleeping. I think of Florence sleeping. I know what her face will be like. She will be asleep and not with me.

Next morning it is silent next door. I walk along the corridor hoping I will not run into Florence and Archie. Maids are starting to clean the rooms. I pass people on the stairs and say 'good morning'. The hotel smells of furniture polish and fried food. At the door to the breakfast room I bump into them. We smile at one another, I slide by and secure a table behind a pillar. I open the newspaper and order haddock, tomatoes, mushrooms and fried potatoes.

Last night I dreamed I had a nervous breakdown: that I was walking around a foreign town incapable of considered thought or action, not knowing who I was or where I was going. I wonder whether this is a wish, that I want to incapacitate myself rather than seriously consider what I should do. I need to remind myself that such hopelessness will lead to depression. Better to do something. After breakfast I will get the train back to London.

I am thinking that it is likely that I will never see Florence again when she rushes around the corner.

"What are you doing? What are you intending to do? Oh Rob, tell me."

She is close to me, breathing over me; her hair touches my face, her hand is on mine, and I want her again, but I hate her, and hate myself.

"What are you intending to do?" I ask.

"I will persuade him to leave."

"When?"

"Now. He'll be on the lunch time train."

"No doubt sitting next to me."

"But we can talk and be together! I'll do anything you want." I look at her doubtfully. She says, "Don't go this morning. Don't do that to me."

For some reason a man I have never seen before, with a lapel badge saying manager, is standing beside the table.

"Excuse me," he says.

Florence does not notice him. "I beg you," she says. "Give me a chance." She kisses me. "You promise?"

"Excuse me," the hotel manager says. "The car you ordered is here, Sir." I stare at him. He seems to regard us as a couple. "The rental car - suitable for a man and a woman, touring."

"Oh yes," I say.

"Would you both like to look at it now?"

With a wave, Florence goes. Outside, I gaze at the big, four door family saloon, chosen in a moment of romantic distraction. I sit in it.

After breakfast I drive into Lyme Regis, buy fish and chips and walk on the Cobb; later I drive to Charmouth, climb up the side of the cliff and look out to sea. It is beginning to feel like being on holiday with your parents when you are too old for it.

I return to the hotel to say goodbye to Florence again in the conservatory, reading the papers, is Archie, wearing a suit jacket over a T-shirt, brown shorts and black socks and shoes, looking like someone who has dressed for the office but forgotten to put their trousers on.

As I back away, hoping he has not recognized me and if he does, that he will not quite recall who I am, he says, "Have a good morning?"

In front of him is a half empty bottle of wine. His face is covered in a fine glaze of sweat.

I tell him where I've been.

"Busy boy," he says.

"And you? You're still around... here?"

"We've walked and even read books. I'm terribly, terribly glad I came.

He pours a glass of wine and hands it to me.

I say, "Think you might stay a bit longer?"

"Don't know."

His wife comes to the other door. She blinks several times, her mouth opens, and then she seems to yawn.

"What's wrong with you?" asks her husband.

"Tired," she whispers. "Think I'll lie down."

He winks at me. "Is that an invitation?"

"Sorry, sorry," she says.

"Why the hell are you apologising? Get a grip, Florrie. I spoke to this young man last night." He jabs his finger at me. "You said this thing..." He looks into the distance and massages his temples. "'You said...if you experienced the desires, the impulses, within you, you would break up what you had created, and live anew. But there would be serious consequences. The word was in my head all night. Consequences. I haven't been able to live out those things. I have tried to put them away, but can't. I've got this image...of stuffing a lot of things in a suitcase that can't be closed, that is too small. That is my life. If I lived what I thought...it would all blow down..."

I realise Florence and I have been looking at one another. Sometimes you look at someone instead of touching them.

He regards me curiously. "What's going on? Have you met my wife?"

"Not really."

My lover and I shake hands.

Archie says, "Florrie, he's been unhappy in love. Married woman and all that. We must cheer him up."

"Is he unhappy?" she says. "Are you sure? People should cheer themselves up. Don't you think, Rob?"

She crooks her finger at me and goes. Her husband ponders his untrue life. As soon as his head re-enters his hands, I am away, racing up the stairs.

My love is lingering in the corridor.

"Come."

She pulls my arm; with shaking hands I unlock my door; she hurries me through my room and into the bathroom. She turns on the shower and the taps, flushes the toilet, and falls into my arms, kissing my face and neck and hair.

I am about to ask her to leave with me. We could collect our things, jump in the car and be on the road before Archie has lifted his head and wiped his eyes. The idea burns in me-, if I speak, our lives could change.

"Archie knows."

I pull back so I can see her. "About our exact relation to one another?"

She nods. "He's watching us. Just observing us."

"He wants to be sure, before he makes his move."

"What move?"

"Before he gets us."

"Gets us? How?"

"I don't know. But it's torture, Rob."

This thing has indeed made her mad,- such paranoia I find abhorrent. Reality, whatever it is, is -the right anchor. Nevertheless, I have been considering the same idea myself. I do not believe it, and yet I do.

"I don't care if he knows," I say. "I'm sick of it."

"But we mustn't give up!"

"What? Why not?"

"There is something between us ... which is worthwhile."

"I don't know anymore, Florrie. Florence."

She looks at me and says, "I love you, Rob."

She has never said this before. We kiss for a long time.

I turn off the taps and go through into the bedroom. She follows me and somehow we fall onto the bed. I pull up her skirt; soon she is on me. Our howls would be known to the county. When I wake up she is gone.

I walk on the beach; there is a strong wind. I put my head back: it is raining into my eyes. I think of Los Angeles, my work, and of what will happen in the next few months. A part of my life seems to be over, and I am waiting for the new.

After supper I am standing in the garden outside the dining room, smoking weed, and breathing in the damp air. I have decided it is too late to return to London tonight. Since waking up I have not spoken to Florence, only glanced into the dining room where she and her husband are seated at a table in the middle. Tonight she is wearing a long purple dress. She has started to look insistent and powerful again, a little diva. with the staff, like ants, moving around only her because they cannot resist. One more night and she will bring the room down with a wave and stride out towards the sea. I know she is going to join me later. It is only a wish, of course, but won't she be wishing too? It is probably our last chance. What will happen then? I have prepared my things and turned the car around.

There is a movement behind me.

"That's nice," she says, breathing in.

I put out my arms and Martha holds me a moment. I offer her the joint. She

inhales and hands it back.

"What are you thinking?"

"Next week I'm going to Los Angeles to be in a film."

"Is that true?"

"What about you?"

She lives nearby with her parents. Her father is a psychology lecturer in the local college, an alcoholic with a violent temper who has not been to work for a year. One day he took against London, as if it had personally offended him, and insisted the family move from Kentish Town to the country, cutting them off from everything they knew.

"We always speculate about the people who stay here, me and the kitchen girl." She says suddenly, "Is something wrong?"

She turns and looks behind. As Martha has been talking, I have seen Florence come out into the garden, watch us for a bit, and throw up her hands like someone told to mime 'despair'. A flash of purple and she is gone.

"What is it?"

"Tell me what you've been imagining about me," I say.

"But we don't know what you're doing here. Are you going to tell me?"

"Can't you guess?" I say impatiently. "Why do you keep asking me these things?"

She takes offence, but I have some idea of how to get others to talk about themselves. I discover that recently she has had an abortion, her second; that she rides a motorbike; that the young people carry knives, take drugs and copulate as often as they can; and that she wants to get away.

"Is the bar shut?" I ask.

"Yes. I can get you beer if you want."

"Would you like to drink a glass of beer with me?" I ask. "More than one glass, I hope."

I kiss her and tell her to come to my room. "But what will your parents say if you are late home?"

"They don't care. Often I find an empty room and sleep in it. Don't want to go home." She says, "Are you sure it's only beer you want?"

"Whatever you want," I say. "You've got a key."

On the way upstairs I look into the front parlour. In the middle of the floor Florence and Archie are dancing-, or rather, he is holding onto her as they heave about. The Scrabble Board and all the letters have been knocked on the floor. His head is flopped over her shoulder: in five years he will be bald. Florence notices me and raises a hand, trying not to disturb him.

He calls out, "Hey!"

"Drunk again," I say to her.

"I know what you have been doing. Up to!" he says with leering emphasis,

"When?"

"This afternoon. Siesta. You know."

I look at Florence.

"The walls are thin," he says. "But not quite thin enough. I went upstairs. I had to fetch a glass from the bathroom. But what an entertainment. Jiggy-jig, jiggy-jig!"

"I'm glad to be an entertainment, you old fucker," I say. "I wish you could be the same for me."

"What was Rob doing this afternoon?" Florence says. "Don't leave me out of the game."

"Ha, ha, ha! You're a dopey little thing who never notices anything!"

"Don't talk to her like that-," I say. "Talk to me like that, if you want, and see what you get!"

"Rob," says Florence, soothingly.

Archie slaps Florence on the behind. "Dance, you old corpse!"

I stare at his back. He is too drunk to care that he's being provoked into a fight.

I feel like an intruder and am reminded of the sense I had as a child, when visiting friends' houses, that the furniture, banter and manner of doing things were different to the way we did them at home. The world of Archie and Florence is not mine.

I am waiting for Martha on the bed when I hear Florence and Archie in the corridor opening the door to their room. The door closes-, I listen intently, wondering if Archie has passed out and Florence is lying there awake.

The door opens and Martha rattles a bag of beer bottles. We open the windows, lie down on the bed and drink and smoke.

She leans over me. "Do you want one of these?"

I kiss her fist and open it. "I know what it is," I say. "But I've never had one."

"I hadn't 'til I came down here," she says. "These are good Es."

"Fetch some water from the bathroom."

Meanwhile I remove the chair from its position beside the wall and begin shoving the heavy bed.

"Let's have this...over there...against the wall," I say when she returns.

Martha starts to help me, an enthusiastic girl, with thick arms.

"Why do you want this?" she asks.

"I think it will be better for our purposes."

"Right," she says. "Right."

A few minutes after we lie down again, undressed this time, there is a knock on the door. We hold one another like scared children, listen and say nothing. There is another knock. Martha doesn't want to lose her job tonight. Then there is no more knocking. We do not even hear footsteps.

When we are breathing again, under the sheets I whisper, "What do you think of the couple next door? Have you talked about them? Are they suited do you think?"

"I like him," she says.

"What? Really?"

"Makes me laugh. She's beautiful...but dangerous. Would you like to to fuck her?"

I laugh. "I haven't thought about it."

"Listen," she says, putting her finger to her lips.

Neither of us moves.

"They're doing it. Next door."

"Yes," I say. "They are."

"They're quiet," she says. "I can only hear him."

"He's doing it alone."

"No. There ... there she is. A little gasp. Can you hear her now?" Touch me."

"There ... there."

"Martha-"

"Please..."

I go into the bathroom and wash my face. The drug is starting to work. It seems like speed, which I have taken with my friends in the suburbs. This drug, though, opens another window, it makes me feel more lonely. I return to the room and switch the radio on. It must have been loud. We must have been loud. Martha is ungrudging in her love-making. Later, there is a storm. A supernatural breeze, fresh, strangely still and cool, fans us.

Martha goes downstairs early to make breakfast. At dawn I run along the stony beach until I am exhausted-, then I stop, walk a little, and run again, all the while aware of the breaking brightness of the world. I shower, pack and go down for breakfast.

Florence and Archie are at the next table. Archie studies a map:

Florence keeps her head down. She does not appear to have combed her hair. When Archie gets up to fetch something and she looks up, her face is like a mask, as if she has vacated her body.

After breakfast, collecting my things, I notice the door to their room has been wedged open by a chair. The maid is working in a room further along the hall. I look in at the unmade bed, go into my room, find Florence's sweater and gloves in my bag, and take them into their room. I stand there. Her shoes are on the floor, her perfume, necklace, and pens on the bedside table. I pull the sweater over my head. It is tight and the sleeves are too short. I put the gloves on, and wiggle my fingers. I lay them on the bed, I take a pair of scissors from her washbag in the bathroom and cut the middle finger from one of the gloves. I replace the severed digit in its original position.

As I bump along the farm track which leads up to the main road, I get out of the car, look down at the hotel on the edge of the sea and consider going back. I hate separations and finality. I am too good at putting up with things, that is my problem.

London seems to be made only of hard materials and the dust that cannot settle on it; everything is angular, particularly the people. I go to my parents' house and lie in bed; after a few days of this I leave for Los Angeles. There I am just another young actor, but one at least with a job. When I return to London we all leave the flat and I get my own place for the first time.

I have come to like going out for coffee early, with my son in his pushchair, while my Wife -sleeps. Often I meet other men whose wives need sleep, and at eight o'clock on Sunday morning we have chocolate milkshakes in McDonalds, the only place open in the dismal High Street. We talk about our children, and complain about our women. After, I go to the park, usually alone, in order to be with the boy away from my wife. She and I have different ideas about bringing him up. Peaceful moments at home are rare.

It is in the park that I see Florence for the first time since our 'holiday'. She seems to flash past me, as she flashed past the window in the train, nine years ago. For a moment I consider letting her fall back into my memory, but I am too curious for that. "Florence! Florence!" I call, again, until she turns.

She tells me she has been thinking of me and expecting us to meet, after seeing one of my films on television.

"I have followed your career, Rob."

She calls her son and he stands with her; she takes his hand. We look one another

over. She and Archie have bought a house on the other side of the park.

"I even came to the plays. I know it's impossible, but I wondered if you ever glimpsed me, from the stage."

"No, But I did wonder if you took an interest."

"How could I not?"

I laugh and ask, "How am I?"

"Better, now you do less. You probably know - you don't mind me telling you this-?"

I shake my head. "You know me," I say.

"You were an intense actor. You left yourself nowhere to go. I like you still." She hesitates. "Still, I mean,"

She looks the same but as if a layer of healthy fat has been scraped from her face, revealing the stitching beneath. There is even less of her; she seems a little frail, or fragile. She has always been delicate but now she moves cautiously.

As we talk I recollect having let her down, but am unable to recall the details. She was active in my mind for the months after our 'holiday' but I found the memory to be less tenacious after relating the story to a friend as a tale of a young man's foolishness and misfortune. When he laughed I forgot: there is nothing as forgiving as a joke.

However, I have often wished for Florence's advice and support, particularly when the press took a fascinated interest in me, and started to write untrue stories. In the past few years I have played good parts and been praised and well paid. However, my sense of myself has not caught up with the alteration. I have been keeping myself down, and pushing happiness away. "Success hasn't changed you," people tell me, as if it were, a compliment.

When we say goodbye, Florence tells me when she will next be in the park. "Please come," she says. At home I write down the time and date, pushing the note under a pile of papers.

She and I are wary with one another, and make only tentative and polite conversation; however, I enjoy sitting beside her on a bench in the sun, outside the teahouse, while her eight year old plays football. He is a hurt, suspicious boy with hair down to his shoulders, which he refuses to have cut. He likes to fight with bigger children and she does not know what to do with him. Without him, perhaps, she would have got away.

At the moment I have few friends and welcome her company. The phone rings constantly but I rarely go out or invite anyone round, having become almost phobic where other people are concerned. What I imagine about others I cannot, say, but the human mind is rarely clear in its sight. Perhaps I feel depleted, having just played the lead in a film.

During the day I go to the studio and record radio plays and audio books. I like learning to use my voice as an instrument. Probably I spend too much time alone, thinking I can give myself everything. My doctor, with whom I drink, is fatuously keen on pills and cheerfulness. He says that if what I have cannot make me happy, nothing will. He would deny the useful facts of human conflict, and wants me to take antidepressants, as if I would rather be paralysed than know my terrible selves.

Having wondered for months why I was waking up every morning in despair, I have started therapy. I am aware, partly from my relationship with Florence, that that

which cannot be said is the most dangerous omission. I am only beginning to understand psychoanalytic theory, yet am inspired by the idea that we do not live on a fine point of consciousness but exist in all areas of our being simultaneously, particularly the dreaming. Until I started lying down in Dr Wallace's room. I had never had such extended conversations about the deepest personal matters. To myself I call analysis - two people talking - 'the apogee of civilisation'. Lying in bed I have begun to go over my affair with Florence. These are more like waking dreams Coleridge's 'flights of lawless speculation' - than considered reflections, as if I am setting myself a subject for the night. Everything returns at this thoughtful age, particularly childhood.

One afternoon in the autumn, after we have met four or five times, it is wet, and Florence and I sit at a table inside the damp teahouse. The only other customers are an elderly couple. Florence's son sits on the floor drawing.

"Can't we get a beer?" Florence says.

"They don't sell it here."

"What a damned country."

"Do you want to go somewhere else?"

She says, "Can you be bothered?"

"Nope."

Earlier I notice the smell of alcohol on her. It is a retreat I recognise; I have started to drink with more purpose myself.

While I am at the counter fetching the tea, I see Florence holding the menu at arms' length; then she brings it closer to her face and moves it away again, seeking the range at which it will be readable. Earlier I noticed a spectacle case in the top of her bag, but had not realised they were reading glasses.

When I sit down, Florence says, "Last night Archie and I went to see your new film. It was discomfiting to sit there looking at you with him."

"Did Archie remember me?"

"At the end I asked him. He remembered the weekend. He said you had more substance to you than most actors. You helped him."

"I hope not."

"I don't know what you two talked about that night, but a few months after your conversation Archie left his job and went into publishing. He accepted a salary cut, but he was determined to find work that didn't depress him. Oddly, he turned out to be very good at it. He's doing well. Like you."

"Me? But that is only because of you." I want to give her credit for teaching me something about self-belief and self-determination. "Without you I wouldn't have got off to a good start...."

My thanks make her uncomfortable, as if I am reminding her of a capacity she does not want to know she is wasting.

"But It's your advice I want," she says anxiously. "Be straight, as I was with you. Do you think I can return to acting?"

"Are you seriously considering it?"

"It's the only thing I want for myself."

"Florence. I read with you years ago but I have never seen you on stage. That aside, the theatre is not a profession you can return to at will."

"I've started sending my photograph around," she continues. "I want to play the

great parts, the women in Chekhov and Ibsen. I want to howl and rage with passion and fury. Is that funny? Rob, tell me if I'm being a fool. Archie considers it a middle-aged madness.

"I am all for that," I say.

As we part she touches my arm and says "the other day. I don't think you saw me or did you?"

"But I would have spoken."

"You were shopping in the deli. Was that your wife? The blonde girl-"

"It was someone else. She has a room nearby."

"And you-"

"Florence-"

"I don't want to pry," she says. "But you used to put your hand on my back, to guide me, like that, through crowds..."

I do not like being recognised with the girl for fear of it getting in the papers and back to my wife. But I resent having to live a secret life. I am confused.

"I was jealous," she says.

"Were you? But why?"

"I had started to hope ... that it wasn't too late for you and me. I think I care for you more than I do for anybody. That is rare, isn't it?"

"I've never understood you," I say, irritably. "Why would you marry Archie ... and then start seeing me?"

It is a question I have never been able to put, fearing she will think I am being critical of her, or that I will have to hear of their ultimate compatibility.

She says, "I hate to admit it, but I imagined, in some superstitious way that marriage would solve my problems and make me feel secure." When I laugh she looks at me hard. "This raises a question that we both have to ask.

"What is that?"

She glances at her son and says softly. "Why do you and I go with people who won't give us enough?"

I say nothing for a time. Then follows the joke which is not a joke, but which makes us laugh freely for the first time since we met again. I have been reading an account by a contemporary author of his break-up with his partner. It is relentless, and probably because it rings true, has been taken exception to. Playfully I tell Florence that surely divorce is an underestimated pleasure, People speak of the violence of separation, but what of the delight? What could be more refreshing than never having to sleep in the same bed as that rebarbative body, and hear those familiar complaints? Such a moment of deliverance would be one to hug to yourself for ever, like losing one's virginity, or becoming a millionaire.

I stand at the door of the teahouse to watch her walk back across the park, under the trees. She carries a white umbrella, treading so lightly she barely disturbs the rain drops on the grass, her son running ahead of her. I am certain I can hear laughter hanging in the air like, an ethereal jinn.

The next time I see her she comes at me quickly, kissing me on both cheeks and saying she wants to tell me something.

We take the kids to a pub with a garden. I have started to like her shaven-headed boy, Ben, having at first not known how to speak to him. "Like a human being," I decide

is the best method. We put my son on a coat on the ground and he bustles about on his hands and bandy legs, nose down, arse sticking up. Ben chases him and hides: the baby's laugh makes us all laugh. Others' pleasure in him increases mine. It has taken a while, but I am getting used to serving and enjoying him, rather than seeing what I want as the important thing.

"Rob, I've got a job, she says. "I wrote to them and went in and auditioned. It's a pub theatre, a basement smelling of beer and damp. There's no money, only a cut of the box-office. But it's good work. It is great work!"

She is playing the mother in *The Glass Menagerie*. By coincidence, the pub is at the end of my street. I tell her I am delighted.

"You will come and see me, won't you?"

"But yes."

"I often wonder if you're still upset about that holiday." We have never discussed it but now she is in the mood. "I've thought about it a thousand times. I wish Archie hadn't come."

I laugh. It is too late; how could it matter now?

She says, "I mean, I wish I hadn't brought him. Sitting in that stationary train with you scowling was the worst moment of my life. But I had thought I was going mad. I had been looking forward to the holiday. The night before we were to leave Archie asked again if I wanted him to come. He could feel how troubled I was. As I packed in the bedroom I realised that if we went away together my marriage would shatter. You were about to go to America.

Your film would make you successful. Women would want you. I knew you didn't really want me - "

This is hard. But I understand that Archie is too self absorbed to be disturbed by her. He asks for and takes everything. He does not see her as a problem he has to solve, as I do. She has done the sensible thing, finding a man she cannot make mad.

She goes on, "I required Archie's strength and security more than passion - or love. That was love, to me. He asked, too, if I were having an affair."

"To prove that you weren't, you invited him to come." She puts her hand on my arm. "I'll do anything now. Say the word."

I cannot think of anything I want her to do.

For a few weeks I do not see her. We are both rehearsing. One Saturday, my wife Helen is pushing the kid in a trolley in the supermarket as I wander about with a basket. Florence comes round a corner and we begin talking at once. She is enjoying the rehearsals. The director does not push her far enough - "Rob, I can do much more!" - but he will not be with her on stage, where she feels 'queenlike'. "Anyhow, we've become friends," she says meaningfully.

Archie does not like her acting; he does not want strangers looking at her, but he is wise enough to let her follow her wishes. She has got an agent; she is seeking more work. She believes she will make it.

After our spouses have packed away their groceries, Archie comes over and we are introduced again. He is large; his hair sticks out, his face is ruddy and his eyebrows look like a patch of corn from which a heavy creature has recently risen. Helen looks across suspiciously. Florence and I are standing close to one another; perhaps one of us is touching the other.

At home I go into my room, hoping Helen will not knock. I suspect she won't ask me who Florence is. She will want to know so much that she won't want to know.

Without having seen the production, I rouse myself to invite several people from the film and theatre world to see Florence's play. Drinking in the pub beforehand, I can see that to the director's surprise the theatre will be full; he is wondering where all these smart people in deluxe loafers have come from, scattered amongst the customary drinkers with their elbows on the beer-splashed bar, watching football on television with their heads craned up, as if looking for an astronomical wonder. I become apprehensive myself, questioning my confidence in Florence and wondering how much of it is gratitude for her encouragement of me. Even if I have put away my judgement, what does it matter? I seem to have known her for so long that she is not to be evaluated or criticised but is just a fact of my life. The last time we met in the teahouse she told me that eighteen months ago she had a benign lump removed from behind her ear. The fear that it will return has given her a new fervency.

The bell rings. We go through a door marked 'Theatre and Toilets' and gropingly make our way down the steep, worn stairs into a cellar, converted into a small theatre. The programme is a single sheet, handed to us by the director as we go in. The room smells musty, and despite the dark the place is shoddy. There is a pillar in front of me I could rest my cheek on. Outside I hear car alarms and from upstairs the sound of cheering men. But in this small room the silence is charged by concentration and the hope of some homemade magnificence. For the first time in years I am reminded of the purity and intensity of the theatre.

When I get out at the interval I notice Archie pulling himself up the stairs behind me. At the top, panting, he takes my arm to steady himself. I buy a drink, and, in order to be alone, go and stand outside the pub. I am afraid that if my friends, the 'important' people, remain after the interval it is because I would disapprove if they left; and if they praise Florence to me, it is only because they would have guessed the ulterior connection. The depth and passion Florence has on stage is clear to me. But I know that that which an artist finds interesting about their own work, the part they consider original and penetrating, will not necessarily compel an audience, who might not even notice it, but only attend to the story.

Archie's head pokes around the pub door. His eyes find me and he comes out. I notice he has his son, Ben, with him.

"Hallo Rob, where's Matt?" says Ben.

"Matt's my son," I explain to Archie. "He is in bed, I hope."

"You happen to know one another?" Archie says.

I tug at Ben's baseball cap. "We bump into one another in the park."

"In the teahouse," says the boy. "He and mummy love to talk." he looks at me. "She would love to act in a film you were in. So would I. I'm going to be an actor. The boys at school think you're the best."

"Thank you." I look at Archie. "Expensive school too, I bet."

He stands there looking away but his mind is working. I say to Ben, "What do you think of mummy in this play?"

"Brilliant."

"What is your true opinion," says Archie to me, "as a man of the theatre and film?"

"She seems at ease on stage."

"Will she go any further?"

"The more she does it, the better she will get."

"Is that how it works?" he says. "Is that how you made it?"

"Partly. I am talented, too."

He looks at me with hatred and says, "She will do it more, you think?"

"If she is to improve she will have to."

He seems both proud and annoyed, with a cloudy look, as if the familiar world is disappearing into the mist. Until now she has followed him. I wonder whether he will be able to follow her, and whether she will want him to.

I have gone inside and found my friends when he is at my elbow, interrupting, with something urgent to say.

"I love Florence more and more as time passes," he tells me. "Just wanted you to know that."

"Yes," I say. "Good."

"Right," he says. "Right. See you downstairs."